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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SKOPJE 000420

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/05/2016

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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS SET FOR JULY 5,
CAMPAIGN PLATFORMS TAKE SHAPE

REF: SKOPJE 294 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: P/E CHIEF SHUBLER, REASONS 1.4(B) & (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY. With parliamentary elections scheduled for July 5, governing and opposition parties are building their campaign platforms around common themes of economic development, NATO and EU integration, and education. Despite their stated intent to run issues-based campaigns, however, the parties continue the political trench warfare they began earlier this year (reftel). Current polls show opposition VMRO-DPMNE with a comfortable lead over governing SDSM, and eAlbanian junior coalition partner DUI maintaining its lead over rival DPA. If the mudslinging, catcalling, and generally negative tone of the current campaign continues, voter turnout could be lower than normal, undecided voters would probably punish the governing coalition, and the current opposition could end up in a winning coalition by default. End Summary.

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS JULY 5

12. (SBU) Macedonia's Speaker of Parliament announced April 20 that parliamentary elections will be held on July 5. The announcement, confirming the worst-kept secret in Skopje in recent weeks, followed the parliament's confirmation of the composition of the State Electoral Commission, which will administer the election. Although the official campaign season begins 20 days before election day, all of the parties have been informally campaigning for the past several months (reftel).

GOVERNING PARTIES FOCUS ON ECONOMY, EDUCATION, EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION

13. (SBU) SDSM (governing coalition senior partner) SecGen Kjurkciev told us April 26 that the party's campaign platform would consist mainly of the "three E's": economic development, education, and EU integration. Governing coalition partner DUI will follow a similar line, focusing on economic and social development issues, as well as on NATO and EU integration. (Comment: The SDSM and DUI platforms neatly reflect voters' top priorities as expressed in recent polls -- economic development and jobs, EU integration, and NATO membership. End Comment.) DUI also will take credit for progress achieved in implementing the 2001 Framework Agreement (FWA), including increases in the number of eAlbanians employed in state institutions under the

government's equitable representation program.

ETHNIC MACEDONIAN OPPOSITION MIRRORS FOCUS ON ECONOMY, EDUCATION, EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION

¶4. (SBU) The main opposition parties are taking a similar tack. VMRO-DPMNE officials tell us that "60 percent" of their campaign platform will consist of economic issues, including tax reforms, sustainable development, agriculture, and investment climate reforms. Education and health care reforms will also figure in the VMRO-DPMNE campaign, as will combating corruption. According to VMRO-DPMNE SecGen Jankulovska, the party will pledge to move Macedonia "into the first third of the Transparency International corruption perception index list" -- it currently is ranked 104 of 159 countries on the list. Inter-ethnic issues will not figure prominently in DPMNE's campaign.

¶5. (SBU) VMRO-Narodna is pledging to pursue a "positive campaign" that focuses on improving the economic environment for small businesses. The party will actively support NATO and EU membership, while criticizing the slow pace of Macedonia's progress toward NATO and EU membership to date. Narodna also will propose a more progressive corporate tax, and a decrease in the VAT on food. On agriculture, the party will propose a government purchase of aircraft to help farmers export produce to western European markets.

¶6. (C) Like VMRO-DPMNE, Narodna leaders say they will avoid directly addressing FWA or inter-ethnic issues. However, Narodna leader Georgievski's recent stump speeches have chastised ethnic Macedonians for allowing themselves to become "second class" citizens in their own country, a

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thinly-veiled and ethno-centric reference to the perceived political concessions eMacedonians have been forced to make to eAlbanians.

ETHNIC RIGHTS CAMPAIGN PLANKS FOR eALBANIAN OPPOSITION DPA

¶7. (SBU) Opposition DPA (eAlbanian opposition) leaders tell us they will attack DUI's record on FWA implementation and will pledge to secure the use of the Albanian language in Macedonian institutions as a second official language. They also propose to accelerate implementation of equitable representation, and to dedicate 25 percent of the state budget for infrastructure and other projects to benefit the eAlbanian population. DPA leader Arben Xhaferi has pledged that the party will not engage in ethnic hate rhetoric. Like the other opposition parties, DPA will also focus on economic issues, but with a distinct focus on improving the "economic equality" of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia.

POLITICAL TRENCH WARFARE CONTINUES

¶8. (SBU) Despite the parties' stated intent to run issues-based campaigns and to refrain from ad hominem attacks, the political mudslinging and catcalling that began earlier this year has continued unabated. VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM have traded salvos in the local press recently over mutual accusations of involvement in the region's lucrative cigarette smuggling business.

¶9. (C) DPA has attacked DUI for allegedly selling out eAlbanian interests during its stint in the coalition government. DPA also accuses DUI of bringing in Kosovar "muscle" to help manipulate the election results in DUI's favor, and has pledged to call in its own Kosovar "reinforcements" to act as a deterrent against DUI's allies from Kosovo, a move the Ambassador has actively discouraged while warning DUI against allowing foreign "supporters" from interfering in the electoral process.

POLLS SHOW VMRO-DPMNE MAINTAINING LEAD OVER RULING SDSM

¶10. (U) A recent poll conducted by a domestic NGO shows that 52 percent of citizens are undecided regarding which party they will vote for in the elections, while 29 percent say they will support VMRO-DPMNE, 21 percent will back SDSM, and 16 percent will support DUI. DPA garners 10 percent support, SDSM offshoot NSDP gets an impressive 6 percent, and the smaller parties, including VMRO-Narodna, get 4 percent or less. The most popular politicians in Macedonia are VMRO-DPMNE President Nikola Gruevski (32.2 percent), DUI leader Ali Ahmeti (17%), and NSDP President Tito Petkovski (15%). Reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with the government's inability to boost economic growth sufficiently to lower unemployment, only 8 percent of citizens express any confidence in PM Buckovski.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Given the SDSM-led government's consistently low ratings in the polls, we are hearing from an increasing number of SDSM government officials that they do not expect the current coalition to last beyond July 5. Local political analysts have commented to us that intensely negative political campaigning traditionally has produced lower voter turnout, which has tended to favor the opposition. If the negative tone of the current campaign continues, turnout could be lower than expected and undecided voters could end up backing the opposition, producing a winning coalition for the current opposition by default, and validating the increasingly negative public view of government officials in general. End Comment.

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